

Regaining the ‘Lost Self’: A Philosophical Analysis of Survivor’s Guilt

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Abstract: Although there has been much discussion regarding shame and guilt, not enough has been said about the complexities of the relationship between the two. In this paper, I examine one way in which I take shame and guilt to interact – namely in cases of so-called “survivor’s guilt” among victims of trauma. More specifically, I argue that survivor’s guilt may represent a kind of *response* to feelings of shame – one which is centrally tied to the central philosophical notions of autonomy and integrity.

Keywords: guilt, shame, selfhood, agency, autonomy, integrity, trauma

It is so unjust, so unreasonable, that of all people the survivor should have to struggle, all by himself, with some of the greatest psychological difficulties imaginable [...] – why should he in addition be obliged to feel a special responsibility, be persecuted by guilt, tortured by obviously unanswerable questions?

—Bruno Bettelheim¹

[M]an has a right to be considered guilty and to be punished. To explain his guilt away by looking at him as the victim of circumstances also means taking away his human dignity. I would say that it is a prerogative of man to become guilty. To be sure, it also is his responsibility to overcome guilt.

—Viktor Frankl²

Shame is inventive.

—Friedrich Nietzsche³

1. Introduction

There has been much philosophical ink spilled on the subjects of shame and guilt. However, although much has been said about both how these emotions resemble one another and how they differ, not enough has been said about the complexities of the relationship between the two. Yet we may be able to come to a better understanding of these emotions if we look more closely at the ways in which they actually interact with one another. In what follows, I will examine one extreme type of case in which shame and guilt may be said to interact – namely in cases of so-called “survivor’s guilt” among trauma victims.

Although no longer considered an official diagnostic criterion, the phenomenon of survivor's guilt played a very prominent role in the post-WWII development and discussion of the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁴ Indeed, researchers have found that "trauma survivors often experience guilt that relates to the trauma in some way" (Kubany et al., 1996, 428).⁵ Ruth Leys (2007) proposes that the deprioritization of the role of guilt in diagnosing PTSD is, in part, indicative of a "shift in attitude" regarding the survivor experience from a predominantly guilt-centric, "mimetic" approach, on which the survivor is said to unconsciously identify with the perpetrator of the trauma (8), to a more shame-centric approach that focuses on the "antimimetic consciousness of being seen" (10). Characterized in this way, the debate regarding the nature of survivor's guilt reflects an unfortunate theoretical polarization that views survivor's guilt solely in terms of either guilt or shame and thus fails to make room for the interaction of shame and guilt in the survivor experience.

In what follows, I hope to show that both shame *and* guilt play an important role in the etiology and manifestation of survivor's guilt. In so doing, I will resist the idea that shame is a mere reaction to a subject's "consciousness of being seen" and that survivor's guilt, likewise, is not best cashed out in terms of straightforward identification (unconscious or otherwise) with the actual perpetrator(s) of the trauma. Nevertheless, I hope to show that survivors' feelings of shame and guilt are importantly related. More specifically, I will argue that survivor's guilt, properly understood, may represent a kind of *response* to feelings of shame – one which is centrally tied to the philosophical notions of autonomy and integrity – and that it may serve the psychological function of helping the trauma victim grapple with the difficult process of re-integrating a shattered self into and within a world that no longer makes sense to her, albeit at a high cognitive price.

2. Understanding Shame and Guilt

To understand the phenomena that we are dealing with here, it will be helpful to look at the concepts of shame and guilt in a little more detail. Although they often go hand in hand (and are thus sometimes conflated in the literature), shame and guilt are clearly distinct emotions. They are aimed at different kinds of objects and have distinct phenomenologies. Whereas the intentional object of guilt is something the agent does (or fails to do), the object of shame, properly speaking, is something about the agent herself. In other words, guilt focuses on an *action*, shame on the *self*. Of course, we regularly talk about feeling ashamed of things we have done or failed to do, but we really only experience shame in connection with these actions insofar

as we take them to reveal something negative about *who we are* (e.g., in light of who we would like to be). Likewise, although concepts like “original sin” or “white guilt” appear to have persons as their object, the “guilt” in both of these cases refers back to the actions of some party or another, even if not those of the agent herself.

This distinction between shame and guilt can help us see how these two emotions may sometimes come apart. For example, I may feel ashamed, though not guilty, for having missed a free throw in an important basketball game. I experience shame in this scenario because I take the action to reflect something *about me*, about who I am (in this case, a basketball “failure”), in contrast with who I would like to be (e.g., a team hero). Likewise, I may feel guilty for having failed to fulfill a commitment to my significant other in a particular scenario (perhaps a work emergency makes me late for our anniversary dinner) without thereby feeling ashamed for having so failed. That is, I may take myself to have done something wrong (here, having failed my significant other) without believing that this particular case of wrongdoing reveals something about who I am as a person (e.g., that I am an unreliable partner).

A second important distinction to make between shame and guilt is in the way they present themselves to the agent. Although the felt character of both shame and guilt is unpleasant, Deonna et al. (2011) note that in shame one often experiences a sense of insignificance and lack of control (5), whereas in guilt this sense of feeling “small and helpless” may be lacking, though the persistent “gnawing” of guilt at the agent may be accompanied by a desire to make up for the wrongdoing (13). Indeed, shame usually involves a desire to hide or disappear, whereas guilt (except insofar as it is accompanied by shame) rarely does. This desire to flee that accompanies shame is often characterized as a response to a feeling of being *exposed* under the disapproving gaze of a felt other (whether that other be physically present or not), and indeed many cases of shame do appear to display this voyeuristic aspect. Guilt, on the other hand, is less associated with the metaphor of sight than with that of sound – that is, of “hearing” the “voice” of judgment. The guilty person feels *judged*, either by herself (as with the “voice of conscience”) or by another.⁶

However, we must be careful how far we extend these metaphors. As Deonna & Teroni (2008) note, to interpret shame as a wholly “social” emotion (that is, as *always* involving the perceived disapproval of a real or imagined audience) might be to exclude certain cases of shame, in which no real or imagined audience appears to be present (69) – e.g., cases in which I feel ashamed, despite knowing that no one else would disapprove if they noticed.⁷ Similarly, it seems

clear that guilt – although involving a definite evaluative component – need not be triggered by an explicit recognition (the “hearing”) of a negative moral judgment. Indeed, in some cases, the very fact that I feel guilty may be the first explicit indicator I have that I view an action of mine as morally problematic.

Given these distinctions, in what follows I will understand *shame* as an agent’s affective apprehension of herself as failing to exemplify a certain trait that she values in a situation in which exemplifying that trait is relevant to maintaining her desired self-image.⁸ *Guilt*, on the other hand, I will characterize as an agent’s affective apprehension of an action or omission of hers as violating a (usually moral) normative requirement to which she adheres.⁹ Thus, as Deonna et al. (2011) point out, shame appears to be a primarily *value*-driven notion, whereas guilt is *norm*-driven (82). Understood in this way, it should come as no surprise that in many cases, guilt and shame go hand-in-hand, given the common overlap between adhering to a norm and valuing the corresponding character trait that following this norm would exemplify.

Moreover, understanding shame and guilt along these lines allows us to make one more crucial distinction between these two emotions, namely that the latter always appears to imply an attribution of *responsibility* to the agent, whereas the former need (and, indeed, often does) not. While there is much debate in the literature as to whether or not guilt is a purely moral emotion,¹⁰ there seems little doubt that it is *primarily* moral. In general, we do not feel guilty for violating what we take to be non-moral norms, nor for unknowingly or unwillingly violating those we take to be moral. One does not generally feel guilty about using the dessert fork instead of the salad fork when dining at a fancy restaurant (though one may feel ashamed), and neither do we think one ought feel guilty for unwittingly giving someone wrong directions or for missing a friend’s wedding because one’s flight was cancelled. If one feels guilty in these scenarios, we are likely to characterize that feeling as irrational, inappropriate, or at the very least unnecessary. Shame, on the other hand, is often experienced regarding features for which the agent is not directly responsible, as when one finds out one has unknowingly committed a social *faux pas* or when one is ashamed of certain of one’s physical features, like nose size or skin color. Indeed, as we have said, the phenomenology of shame often includes a feeling of *lack* of control, as opposed to a sense of responsibility. (I return to this point below.)

Shame, then, may be said to be inappropriate¹¹ when either a) the values at stake are themselves silly or misguided (e.g., being ashamed for having thumbs or for being female) or b) the agent perceives herself as failing to exemplify an appropriate value relevant to her self-image,

when in fact she does not (e.g., feeling ashamed of one's physique in front of a person who finds one's body sexy). Guilt, likewise, may be inappropriate in two different ways: a) when the adherence to the norm in question is inappropriate (e.g., feeling guilty for failing to prioritize one's fantasy football team over one's spouse), or b) when one attributes responsibility to oneself for an action for which one was not, in fact, responsible. Yet the latter is precisely what appears to be the case in instances of survivor's guilt, in which the survivor of trauma feels guilty about something he had little to no control over. In fact, in many cases, survivor's guilt – given its sometimes stubborn persistence over time – appears straightforwardly *irrational*, insofar as the agent herself judges that she is not responsible for the traumatic event(s) in question. So how are we to understand this phenomenon?

The mimetic theories mentioned in Section (1) above would maintain that the agent unconsciously identifies with the actual perpetrator of the trauma, yet this seems to leave out cases in which there is no identifiable perpetrator to be imitated, as when one feels guilty for having outlived one's own child. Likewise, it fails to fully account for the deep sense of shame typically exhibited by trauma victims. Antimimetic theories, on the other hand, do emphasize the survivor's shame at being exposed in a certain way, but this both fails to account for cases in which there does not appear to be any real or imagined exposure (as with the case above) and does not fully appreciate the extent to which survivors appear to take on actual responsibility for some action or actions relevant to the trauma in question. Thus, a further account is needed to make sense of the complex relationship between shame and guilt in survivors of trauma. And I intend to provide just such an account. However, it may be helpful to first briefly classify a few of the various manifestations of survivor's guilt, in order to get a tighter grasp on the cluster of phenomena we are dealing with here.

3. Varieties of Survivor's Guilt

A prevalent manifestation of guilt feelings emerges among trauma survivors in the form of what we might call *substitution guilt*, namely the feeling that someone else has paid the price for or taken the place of the survivor. Agamben (1999) quotes author and activist Elie Wiesel, himself a concentration camp survivor, as saying: "I live, therefore I am guilty. I am here because a friend, an acquaintance, an unknown person *died in my place*." Another well-known Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi (1989), writes, "It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: [...] that each one of us [...] has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead. It is a supposition, but it gnaws at us; it has nestled deeply like a woodworm; although unseen from

the outside, it gnaws and rasps” (81-2). This type of guilt – namely the feeling that one has done something to “usurp” the place of another, or that someone who died is more “deserving” of life than oneself – is often found among survivors of genocide or war, but it is also observable in other instances, e.g., when children experience the death of a sibling or parents outlive their children. At the heart of this kind of guilt appears to be the perception of an unfair inequality or a gross injustice.¹² The agent assumes that she must have done something *wrong* to be on the receiving end of this unmerited benefit, even if she cannot exactly pinpoint what the relevant action was.¹³

In another form of survivor guilt, however, an agent may know precisely what she feels guilty for – namely for an act or omission of hers that under normal circumstances might be considered morally suspect or even impermissible but which either is excusable under the circumstances or bears no moral relationship to the traumatic event itself. Call this manifestation of survivor’s guilt *transgression guilt*. Thus, a concentration camp survivor may feel guilty for having hoarded or stolen food, or for having failed to keep the Sabbath, or for having (forcibly) worked for the enemy. A soldier may feel guilty for having killed enemy combatants. A victim of date rape may feel guilty for having gotten drunk. But the object of the survivor’s guilt need not be so specific. Sometimes the act or omission in question is much broader. Levi (1989) writes that many Holocaust survivors feel guilty, not for some specific action but more generally for “having failed in terms of human solidarity” (78). In several places, Levi expresses his guilt over having failed to help, to resist, to revolt, both during the rise of fascism and national socialism in Europe and later in the Lager itself, despite admitting that “on a rational plane there should not have been much to be ashamed of” (77).¹⁴ In all of these cases – whether the action be of short or long duration, of narrow or broad scope – the agent has the feeling that she has committed a morally unjustifiable offense, despite her acknowledgement that the circumstances in fact permit, exculpate, or even morally justify such action.¹⁵ Here, we might find a survivor’s feelings of guilt somewhat easier to understand, since she feels guilty about an action or omission in which – under normal circumstances – guilt might be appropriate. Yet insofar as the agent *sincerely* admits that she does not deserve blame and yet still continues to feel guilty, and these cases are no less irrational or inappropriate than the above cases of substitution guilt, although they may occur at a different psychological level.

A related but distinct form of survivor guilt – what we might call *causal role guilt* – is found among many survivors of rape and other violent trauma, in which the agent does not

necessarily feel guilty for having survived where others did not, nor for having committed an otherwise morally questionable action, but rather simply for having in some way or another causally contributed to the traumatic event in question. Thus, a rape victim may feel guilty for, e.g., having attended the party at which she met her rapist, or for having worn supposedly “provocative” clothing, or for having failed to fight back harder against her attacker. In other words, she may feel that she somehow “invited” the rape or at least failed to prevent it from happening.¹⁶ Here, an agent may not view her actions as morally reprehensible, but she may nevertheless experience feelings of guilt insofar as she attributes to herself a key causal role in the bringing about of the traumatic event that she did not actually play or that is irrelevant to the moral status of the event in question. This type of guilt is even more puzzling than transgression guilt, insofar as the agent blames herself for having merely been a part of the causal chain that led to her trauma. Yet playing a causal role is not tantamount to having transgressed a moral norm, so the guilt here appears especially displaced.

These three species of survivor’s guilt are not meant to provide an exhaustive list of the various forms that survivor’s guilt may take. Moreover, in some cases agents likely experience a kind of “mixed guilt” containing elements of each of these variations. Nevertheless, I think that this list suffices to get at one possible way that survivor’s guilt may be plausibly understood, namely as a response to a certain kind of *shame* that often follows the experience of trauma – one that is closely tied to the agent-centered notions of autonomy and integrity. It is to a discussion of this relationship between shame and guilt in the manifestation of survivor’s guilt that I now turn.

4. From Shame to Guilt: Trauma, Autonomy, and Integrity

As mentioned above, survivors of trauma – especially of violent trauma – often experience a deep sense of shame, both during the traumatic incident itself and as a result of it. But in what sense does the trauma survivor experience an “affective apprehension of herself as failing to exemplify a certain trait that she values in a situation in which exemplifying that trait is relevant to maintaining her desired self-image”?

It is my contention that for many trauma survivors the “self-relevant value” in question is not just any value. Rather, it is *the fundamental self-relevant value* – the value that grounds or otherwise frames all other values that we have – namely, the value we place on *agency*. To be a rational agent, one has to be able to set ends for oneself and to govern oneself in light of those ends – that is, one must be able to exercise one’s *autonomy*. Further, rational agents are not isolated agents; they are diachronic agents within an intersubjective context that, in part,

establishes the framework within which they can meaningfully and willfully undertake their intentional projects. Thus, being an agent means also that one must possess a minimal sense of one's self as doing things that make sense within one's immediate environment and have a set of commitments that is at least minimally coherent over time – that is, one must possess a sense of *integrity*. When either of these basic conditions is threatened to a severe degree, this is likely to threaten one's overall sense of agency.

It is not difficult to see in what sense traumatic events threaten one's sense of autonomy. Indeed, it is likely that a perceived lack of autonomy is often (at least in part) what makes an event *traumatic* for a subject in the first place.¹⁷ In most cases of violent trauma, the victims are treated by the perpetrator(s) as though they were not autonomous persons. The physical and emotional violation of a rapist toward his victim, the inhumane treatment of concentration camp prisoners and prisoners of war, the attitude toward slaves as “subhuman” beings or toward women as “weaker specimens” of the human race, the dehumanization of torture victims by their torturers – these are all ways in which perpetrators of trauma may be said to restrict (sometimes even to the point of eliminating) the autonomy of their victims (at least temporarily). But the examples need not be so extreme. A father may feel helpless to save his terminally ill child. A soldier may feel unable to defy orders, even when this results in the death of an innocent.¹⁸ Or a child may not be able to stop his father from abusing his mother. And that same mother may herself so greatly fear making her way on her own that she feels unable to leave her husband. All of these cases might represent situations that severely threaten one's perception of oneself as an full-blown agent and contribute to a very basic experience of shame, given one's perceived inability to instantiate one's autonomy to the degree required for one to have a sense of agency (at least regarding the event(s) in question).

Of course, not every experience of lack of control is perceived as traumatic, and neither do we feel ashamed every time we are unable to implement our autonomy in situations that we care about. However, the shame experienced in trauma often goes deeper than a mere feeling of lack of control, though the agent's perception of her own powerlessness still plays a crucial role. Traumatic events are those that do not fit neatly into an individual's implicit or explicit worldview.¹⁹ Not only does the trauma survivor experience a lack of control or a threat to her autonomy – the traumatic event is, by its very nature, one that disrupts the “flow” or “consistency” of her self-narrative. The traumatized subject can no longer make sense of herself and the world in which she lives in the way she did prior to the traumatic event. In a very

important sense, she has lost the *trust* in the world necessary to orient herself to and within that world. Gry Ardal Printzlau (2011) points to this feature of trauma in her poignant discussion of the effects of torture on the victim:

What survivors of extreme violence try to suggest when they talk about the loss of trust seems to be this profound loss of orientation, meaning, and connection with a shared social world. The loss of trust is a symptom of the shattered embeddedness of the self, and perhaps inextricable from it. Without being connected to a shared world we cannot give coherency and order to our experiences, and disorientation results. Trust is not only an instrument for manoeuvrings in a complex world or a weak kind of belief which one can hold when proper proof is lacking, but appears to be fundamental to how we perceive our world as meaningful and real. (62)

When one's fundamental trust is shattered in this way, one may lose the ability to see oneself as a full-blown, unified self living in a comprehensible world in which one's actions and ends still make sense. In other words, one may lose one's fundamental sense of *integrity*. Thus, the trauma survivor finds herself unable to relate adequately to herself and to others in the way necessary for viewing herself as an autonomous, integrated self – as an *agent-in-the-world*.

We are now in a better position to tell a plausible story about the origins and persistence of survivor's guilt in victims of psychological trauma. As a matter of empirical fact, in everyday situations the subjective negative experience of lack of control often gives rise to superstitions and superstitious behavior, in which engaging in a kind of "magical" causal thinking serves the psychological function of allowing an agent to maintain or regain a sense of control over that which she perceives to be uncontrollable in situations where she cares about the result.²⁰ I want to suggest that something similar occurs in survivor's guilt, though on a much more profound level (given the severity of the perceived lack of agency) – namely, that the survivor of trauma attributes a kind of "magical" causality to herself (here, *agent* causality) as a response to the shame that arises from the perceived lack of autonomy she experiences regarding the traumatic event and the lack of integrity she experiences in its aftermath.

Assuming a subject cares about being an agent, she thus (at least implicitly) takes autonomy and integrity as constitutive self-relevant values. An event may present itself as traumatic, then, at least in part because it is perceived as severely restricting her ability to exemplify these basic values in the sense fundamentally relevant to her self-image (or to her having any self-image whatsoever).²¹ Her apprehension of this inability, then, may manifest itself in a deep and pervasive shame regarding the traumatic event – and perhaps about herself in general (if the perceived violation of autonomy cuts deep enough). Thus, shame may arise in the

form of a negative emotion directed at an agent's perceived lack of autonomy and integrity – and it is this negative emotion, I argue, that may motivate the attribution of guilt to oneself.

Survivor's guilt, then, serves the psychological function of allowing a traumatized agent to retrospectively maintain a sense of agency in the perceived absence of autonomy and integrity, where this guilt assists the agent in coping with her life post-trauma. It is a way of reinstating a sense of meaning for the agent that may allow her to re-orient herself in the world. As Susan Brison (2002), a philosopher and rape survivor, writes in her account of the aftermath of her rape, "it can be less painful to believe that you did something blameworthy than it is to think that you live in a world where you can be attacked at any time, in any place, simply because you are a woman" (13). That is, it is better to perceive oneself as guilty than to try to eke out an existence in a fragmented world that no longer makes sense.

However, one might wonder: If guilt serves this positive, self-(re)building psychological function, wouldn't a more positively-oriented emotion be better equipped to do the job? Guilt, like shame, is a negatively-valenced emotion, and even if it does serve as a coping mechanism, it comes with its own burdensome psychological baggage. Yet as opposed to denial or repression, in which a traumatic event is no longer recognized (or recognized as such) – and in contrast to positive thinking, which downplays the "badness" of the trauma itself – survivor's guilt appears to be a somewhat more *honest* way of grappling with the negative nature of trauma. It does not reject the evil or badness of the traumatic event in question but rather attributes at least partial responsibility for that event or its consequences to the survivor herself. This allows for the recognition of the event as something objectively *bad*, but makes room for the subject to retain a sense of agency in light of her trauma. That is, although survivor's guilt may transform the subject's recollection of the relevant event(s) into something she can understand and control, the nature of the trauma remains itself negative and something that cannot merely be "done away with" via some sort of emotional transformation.

Thus, from the point of view of the subject, in the face of the evil nature of the event(s) in question, *it is better to be a guilty agent than no agent at all*. Re-establishing this sense of agency may represent a step toward the subject's being able to affirm her own humanity and to re-integrate herself and her experience into a meaningful whole. The narrative of autonomy established via survivor's guilt can help her recover a sense of meaning and thus of integrity, even if it results in a radically different worldview than the one implicitly held pre-trauma. As Bruno Bettelheim (1976) writes:

What more impressive demonstration could there be that only the ability to feel guilty makes us human, particularly if, objectively seen, one is not guilty? [...] [Our experience] taught us that there is meaning to life, [...] a much deeper meaning than we had thought possible before we became survivors. And our feeling of guilt for having been so lucky as to survive the hell of the concentration camp is a most significant part of this meaning—testimony to a humanity that not even the abomination of the concentration camp can destroy. (52)

In this way, survivor's guilt may assist a trauma survivor in recovering an at least minimal sense of autonomy and integrity – one that may be psychologically necessary for her to overcome the pervasive shame of a subject whose very selfhood has been severely compromised.

5. Dealing with Survivor's Guilt

For the reasons given above, survivor's guilt may be said to (at least initially) perform a therapeutic function for the trauma survivor, and as such should not be immediately underplayed or dismissed as wholly irrational by family and friends, and especially not by medical or psychological professionals involved in the treatment of the survivor of trauma. Indeed, there is some evidence that, from a therapeutic standpoint, subjects who experience a sense of action-centered guilt cope better with their trauma than those who remain mired in person-centered shame. Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1979, 1985) has shown that what she calls “behavioral self-blame” (blaming oneself for a particular action or actions, or a specific piece of behavior) may, indeed, be therapeutically adaptive, whereas “characterological self-blame” (blame aimed at an enduring character trait or tendency) is primarily maladaptive and associated with depression. I submit that this is because in the former case the subject affirms her agency by positively attributing autonomy to herself regarding the action in question, whereas in the latter case the subject negatively evaluates her own person and character – a phenomenon that looks much more like shame as we have characterized it above.

Still, even as a coping mechanism, survivor's guilt can be extremely psychologically taxing. It is, as we have said above, in some sense emotionally “inappropriate,” insofar as the subject's guilt is centered on something for which she is not responsible (or at least not culpable). Thus, even if it helps the traumatized subject to establish a retrospective sense of control and thereby to make sense of the ultimately senseless evil she experienced, there is still a sense in which she might be at odds with herself, especially insofar as she in some sense sincerely and honestly assesses herself as innocent – as a *victim*. Whereas the presence of guilt feelings and the resulting belief that one is guilty²² may start out as the result of an automatic defense mechanism or even as a kind of “motivated mistake,” a subject may come to psychologically rely on and

identify with her guilt in unhealthy ways. Indeed, subjects who obstinately hold onto their guilt over an extended period of time in the face of strong, recognized evidence to the contrary may slip into a kind of willful self-deception, which often comes at an even higher cognitive price and which can ultimately be autonomy-*undermining*. Not only does self-deception threaten one's general truth-orientedness and thus one's ability to act in a reality-responsive manner within one's environment, it aims at undermining the very standards that establish one's epistemic (and perhaps thereby also one's moral) agency. Furthermore, it is not clear that the consequences of self-deception are always (or even ever) better for one's overall happiness and flourishing than more self-honest approaches. For this reason, although survivor's guilt itself may not always be maladaptive, professionals treating survivors of trauma would do well to look for alternative therapeutic strategies aimed at fostering a sense of autonomy and self-integration that can take the place of survivor's guilt in the subject's response to and evaluation of her trauma.²³

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented an account of survivor's guilt that demonstrates one very interesting way in which shame and guilt may interact in the etiology of and response to trauma. My account neither assesses the phenomenon as a straightforward unconscious identification with the perpetrator of the trauma nor reduces it to an instance of reproachful shame under the gaze of another. Instead, I have argued, survivor's guilt represents a response to a very basic sense of shame arising from a disrupted sense of agency grounded in a perceived lack of autonomy and integrity. The adoption of a feeling of guilt, then, allows the agent to maintain or regain a sense of responsibility and therefore of autonomy, one which can assist in the re-integration of the self into a world that has become otherwise incomprehensible to her. There is, of course, certainly more work to be done on this and related issues. How is survivor's guilt related to paradigm cases of epistemic irrationality, such as wishful thinking or self-deception? How can we evaluate mixed cases in which subjects are simultaneously both the perpetrators and victims of trauma (e.g., perpetrators who are traumatized by their role in inflicting trauma on others, or victims who as a result of their traumatic experiences become perpetrators)? Similarly, in contrast to the innocent subject who experiences guilt in order to escape the shame of heteronomy, what about the responsible agent who denies autonomy, in order to escape guilt? These are all fascinating avenues for future research, and it is my hope that this paper will serve as a springboard for the further discussion of these topics.²⁴

End Notes

¹ Bettelheim (1986), 42.

² Frankl (1978), 51.

³ Nietzsche (1886/1966), §40.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the role survivor's guilt has played in post-WWII discussions of PTSD, cf. Ley (2007).

⁵ Nevertheless, although guilt is "associated" with PTSD, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for a diagnosis. However, for this paper's purposes, it is sufficient to note that feelings of guilt and the survival of trauma often go hand in hand.

⁶ I have borrowed these metaphors from Williams (1993), 89-91.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this point, cf. also Deonna & Teroni (2011), 146-52.

⁸ Here, I depart from Deonna et al.'s (2011) characterization of shame as occurring "when we apprehend a trait or an action of ours that we take to exemplify the polar opposite of a self-relevant value as indicating our incapacity to exemplify this self-relevant value even to a minimal degree" (102). I am not sure that the agent need apprehend herself as exemplifying the relevant value's *polar opposite* to count as experiencing shame, nor that she need apprehend her failure as indicating an incapacity to exemplify the valued trait *even to a minimal degree*.

I also wish to note here that I do not intend my characterizations of either shame or guilt to imply a strong cognitivist theory of the emotions. I would like to leave room for the possibility that the apprehension in question may be non-propositional.

⁹ Here I remain somewhat closer to Deonna et al.'s (2011) definition (cf. 114). I have inserted 'affective' into my characterizations of both 'shame' and 'guilt', since it seems that in either case, one could apprehend the relevant facts in question and yet fail to feel the appropriate emotion.

¹⁰ On this point, see for example Morris (1987); Deigh (1999); Murphy (1999); and Teroni & Bruun (2011).

¹¹ The use of the term 'inappropriate' here is meant to be non-pejorative, since the inappropriateness of the emotion may rest on a mere cognitive or factual error, on the one hand, or a psychological compulsion, on the other. In such cases, although the emotion may rightly be said to be inappropriate in the sense of 'misdirected', it is non-culpably so.

¹² I am indebted to Steven Arkonovich for pointing me to this feature of substitutionary guilt. Blacher (2000), too, notes that survivor's guilt often involves the feeling of "getting more than one's share" (46).

¹³ In some cases of substitutionary guilt, the object of the agent's guilt may simply be "some action or another," where the object of the agent's guilt remains vague and undetermined. In other cases, the agent may focus on an arbitrary incident prior to the traumatic event(s) in question for which she was responsible and postulate a false causal connection between that incident and her unfairly profiting.

¹⁴ Levi often conflates shame and guilt in his writing, but in this passage he is talking almost exclusively of guilt. Of course, that he and his fellow survivors are likewise *ashamed* of the being the *kind* of people who "had not done anything, or not enough, against the system into which we had been absorbed" (76) should also come as no surprise.

¹⁵ Whether the guilt feeling is "inappropriate" here will lie in the details of the action in question. In some cases, we might think agents *ought* to feel guilty – as when a soldier brutally beats a prisoner or shoots an innocent civilian. In such cases, the agent may rightly feel responsible for a piece of wrongdoing, and it may be this very recognition that (in part) leads to his traumatization by the incident. Such "mixed" instances, in which an agent is traumatized by his role in perpetrating trauma, are worth exploring in more detail. However, my main concern in this paper is with instances in which the agent cognitively evaluates herself as having technically done nothing wrong and yet continues to experience pervasive guilt for the action(s) in question.

¹⁶ Of course, in many cultures, the blame *is* in part often either explicitly or implicitly placed on the victim herself, and this may also directly contribute to the survivor's feelings of guilt.

¹⁷ In their chapter, 'The Defining Moment of Psychological Trauma: What Makes a Traumatic Event Traumatic?', Everly & Lating (2003) suggest that one factor that makes a particular event traumatic for an agent is a feeling of helplessness, of lack of self-efficacy or control over a situation (45-7).

¹⁸ Alternatively, a soldier may admit that he willingly followed orders (that is, that he exercised his autonomy in this respect), but he may still feel a lack of control regarding the situation in general – or, say, regarding his ability to both follow orders and save the innocent person. Indeed, one of the reasons moral dilemmas – e.g., in which fulfilling one's duty to X rules out fulfilling one's duty to Y and vice versa – are so psychologically conflicting might hinge on the fact that one perceives oneself as unable to fulfill the *prima facie* demands of morality, namely to do both X and Y.

¹⁹ The idea of a disrupted explanatory worldview is another central feature of Everly & Lating's (2003) discussion of what makes an event traumatic for a person (cf. 36-8).

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Malinowski (1954) and Thompson et al. (1998). Cf. also Griffioen (forthcoming, 2013) for a closer discussion of the connection between lack of control and superstitious belief, especially in sports contexts.

²¹ This may also explain why some experiences are perceived of as traumatic by some subjects but not by others. Certain subjects may not apprehend the event(s) in question as restricting their agency in ways as devastating as others do, or they may have other methods of coping with the perceived failure of autonomy or integrity.

²² Whether or not feeling guilty is always accompanied by the belief that one is guilty is an interesting question for further examination. But the fact that subjects who experience survivor's guilt also tend to experience a significant amount of cognitive dissonance indicates that there is likely some perceived tension between feeling guilty and the assessment that one has done nothing wrong – a tension that might be best explained by recourse to conflicting beliefs.

²³ Brison (2002) suggests, for example, that rape survivors take self-defense courses or engage in political activism as means "to break out of the double bind of self-blame or helplessness" (76).

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